DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 347 RC 024 119

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TITLE	Cesar Chavez: A Case Study of a Resilient Child's Adaptation into Adulthood.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	8p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	At Risk Persons; Case Studies; *Disadvantaged Youth; *Educational Needs; Interpersonal Competence; Mexican Americans; Migrant Workers; *Minority Group Children; Persistence; Poverty; Racial Discrimination; *Resilience (Personality); Self Esteem
IDENTIFIERS	*Chavez (Cesar); *Protective Factors; Risk Factors

ABSTRACT

Children from poor families exhibit more conduct disorders, chronic illnesses, school problems, hyperactivity, and emotional disorders than children who are not poor. Minority children that are poor face the additional disadvantage of marginalization. Research indicates that support and strong personal skills are needed for such children to be resilient and ultimately successful. Resiliency theory discusses three major variables: risk factors, which are stressful situations and chronic adversity that hinder children's successful development; protective factors, which are variables such as family support, a relationship with community or mentors, and a strong sense of self that outweigh risk factors; and resiliency, the attributes of which are social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. A case study of Cesar Chavez provides an example of a resilient individual and provides children with a story that will help uncover ways to develop their resiliency. Cesar Chavez came from an impoverished family, was homeless as a child, lived in impoverished dilapidated neighborhoods, worked as a migrant farm worker, and was a member of a minority group (Mexican American). Protective factors in his life were his supportive relationship with his mother and grandmother, his connection to the church, and his overall positive self-concept. He grew up to become a leader and founder of the United Farm Workers Union. Resiliency theory is used to analyze the success of Cesar Chavez. Educators must learn to foster resiliency and academic success for students. (TD)

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ED 478 347

César Chávez: A Case Study of a Resilient Child's Adaptation into Adulthood

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César Chávez: A Case Study of a Resilient Child's Adaptation into Adulthood
Written by Julia Gonzales

Recent research indicates that children represent a disproportionate share of the poor. In 2001, 11.7 million children, or 16.3 percent were poor, children represent 35.7 percent of the nation's poor, yet they are only one-fourth (25.6 percent) of the total population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001).

The effects of growing up with poverty has a substantial effect on the well being of children and adolescents, especially in terms of impairments in learning ability and in school achievement (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Schteingart, Molnar, Klein, Lowe, and Hartmann, 1995). The impact of childhood poverty effects children in multiple ways and behaviors; often times children from poor and disadvantaged families show three times the conduct disorders, almost twice the chronic illness, and more than twice the school problems, hyperactivity, and emotional disorders than children who are not poor (D.P Ross, Shillington, & Lochead, 1994).

Poverty stricken children that often times suffer additional adversity are minority children. Many minority children and youth face multiple disadvantages, such as exclusion form society's benefits (often referred to as marginilization) and poverty. Marginilization can result in a sense of alienation, loss of social cohesion, and rejection of the norms of the larger society (Steinhauer, 1996). Children that are able to resist the combined negative effects of poverty and marginalization takes unusual strength, and substantial support from family, or external sources.

The classic longitudinal research on such children by Werner & Smith (1992) focused on such children. Werner & Smith were interested in the long-term effects of "risk factors," such as: poverty, parental psychopathology, and perinatal stress. As well as "protective factors" such as: a close relationship with at least one adult, disposition attributes, and at least average intelligence had on their development. Their research findings pointed to support and strong personal skills as a determinant if the child will be resilient, and ultimately successful. Their significant results spurred an interest in scholars, researchers, practitioners, educators in a variety of disciplines that work with at-risk youth who are interested in the practical application of theoretical concepts for at-risk youth.

For over two decades now, educational researchers such as Emory L. Cowen, James Garabarino, Norman Garmezy, Richard Jessor, Suandra Murray Nettles, Michael Rutter, Emmy E. Werner, and many others have been probing the issues surrounding resilience. These researchers report that schools can and should promote and support resilience in order to help their students beat the odds (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994).

The reality of chronic adversity and disadvantage that plague a disproportionate number our children face becomes a clear need for educators need to be conscious of methods in which help foster resiliency and academic success for students. In fact, many educators and school systems have begun to look at resiliency as a tool for identifying ways in which their students can overcome the perils of adversity. The Minneapolis Public School system is among the pioneers in this application. For many years, it has trained the majority of its teachers in resilience strategies. It also distributes a training manual called "Moving Beyond Risk to Resiliency" to show teachers how to help kids build social skills, reduce

stress, and increase their sense of skill mastery (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994).

Other studies suggest that one positive approach to help at risk students by positive ethnic affiliation. Positive ethnic affiliation among Mexican-American (and other groups) greatly influence individual development in many ways, including lifestyle, values, opinions, attitudes, and approaches to learning (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990).

The goals of this research include four objectives in presenting an analytical case study of César Chávez. 1) Build the theory of resiliency. 2) Provide an exemplary model of a "resilient" individual." 3) Provide educators with a theoretical framework that will assist their students with an integration of theoretical concepts including but not limited to the real world, as well as an integration of their personal experiences, and knowledge. 4) Provide children with a story that will help uncover ways to develop their resiliency.

César Chávez is a man that symbolized freedom, a Mexican- American civil rights leader, and humanitarian. Nevertheless, who was the real César Chávez? How did a young poor, uneducated, minority overcome his obstacles in life, and develop into such a successful leader? What were Chávez's early experiences that may have led to his successful adulthood? Research of Chávez's life as a case study; will help examine his life in relation to the theory of resiliency.

The Resiliency theory is a developmental psychological perspective that began nearly fifty years ago. Werner and Smith (1992) are leading authorities on the topic. In the early 1950's they were researched the long-term effects of childhood adversity on the adult lives of men and women who were exposed to poverty, parental discord/ and or psychopathology, and perinatal stress- (occurring in concerned with or being in the period around the time of birth). Their research findings pointed to support, and strong personal skills as a determinant if the child will be resilient, and ultimately successful.

The theory of Resiliency discusses three major variables. The first is **risk factors**, which can be described as stressful situations and chronic adversity that put children's successful development at risk (i.e., chronic poverty, child abuse, neglects, marginiliztion as a minority, divorce, living in violent communities, perinatal stress, and serious care giving deficits). The second variable is a **protective factor**. **Protective factors** can be described as variables that reduce the chances that a child will develop abnormally (Mash, and Wolfe, 2002) (i.e., strong family supports, a relationship with community, church, a mentor, and a strong sense of self). Garmezy (1991) found that if there is presence of one or more protective factors in "at risk" child's life they are more likely to weigh out the negative risk factors. The third variable is the "**resilient child.**" According to Bonnie Bernard (1991,1997) there are at least four common attributes of the resilient child. They exhibit: **social competence**- these children are flexible, empathetic, responsive and caring. They have many relationships, and friendships with others. Resilient children also exhibit **problem-solving skills**- they are able to think critically, reflectively, and are apt to solve social problems with creativity. Resilient children also exhibit **autonomy**- they have a strong sense of self, a positive self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Lastly, they exhibit a **sense of purpose**- resilient children believe that they will have a bright future, and that they themselves determine their lives.

César Chávez is an interesting person to research for this theory because his life demonstrates several developmental risks, as well as protective factors. Examples of his risks I found are: he came from an impoverished family, was homeless as a child, lived in impoverished dilapidated neighborhood, and was a minority. Examples of Chávez's

protective factors in his life are his supportive relationships with his mother, grandmother, connection to the church, and his overall positive self-concept.

In my research of Chávez I have found that before he became a leader and founder of the United Farm Workers union, he was a poor migrant farm worker. It is remarkable how Chávez overcame many hardships, and grew into a successful adult. How is it that an individual like Chávez can overcome obstacles and extreme hardships to become a successful adult? In psychology, researchers have been puzzled over this same question. The resiliency theory describes such people. Researchers have found children who survive risky environments such as César Chávez due in part to their strong self-confidence, coping skills, and abilities to avoid risk situations are considered resilient- they seem able to fight off or recover from their misfortune (Zimmerman, M.A and R. Arunkumar, 1994).

César Chávez was born March 31, 1927 to parents Librado and Juana Chávez in a small town twenty miles north of Yuma Arizona. César Chávez was born into a middle class family. César's father, Librado was a small businessman who owned a small grocery store, a pool hall, and auto repair shop (Griswold Del Castillo, and Garcia 1995). In the early years of the Great Depression the Chávez family was virtually untouched by the unemployment, and poverty that many others experienced.

However it was not long until the family also felt the affects of the depression. Through a bad business decision, coupled with granting clientele credit for grocery purchases, and auto repairs, the Chávezs' were forced to sell their businesses to cover back taxes, and business obligations. The family then had to live with Grandmother Chávez in an old adobe house on a 160-acre homestead.

Before long, the family was in debt again owing the state $4,080 in back taxes. They were unable to make payments so their property was seized, and they were allowed to stay on the property for one more year. At this time Librado as many other men at this time left for California for farm work. Librado believed that the work in California would bring enough money to get the farm back. Dreadfully, he found that the wages earned in farm labor were substandard, and would require a collective effort from the entire family, including his children. Sadly, they were still unable to raise enough money to buy the farm back. They were forced to sell it, and move. The family then set off for a new life of migrant farm work.

This period in young César's life can be described as a period of "**risk factors**." It was during this time that the family lost their livelihood. They lost all of their assets, and were essentially homeless. This marked the beginning of many decades to come filled with struggles for money and survival for César Chávez. César's experience with chronic poverty was very painful. This type of stress for a young child is very detrimental to their normal development. It causes worry, and anxiety for the child. In addition, chronic food deprivation can cause serious physical, and cognitive health problems.

For the next ten years, the Chávez family worked in migrant farm labor. It is these experiences that can also be described as "**risk factors**." During his years spent in migrant farm labor, César's family incurred a lot of maltreatment, including intolerable working and living conditions, and racism. During these difficult times for the Chávezs' like many other migrant workers of the time experienced a series of exploitations. The Chávez family experienced was unremitting hunger; poor wages; many times they barely made enough money for gas to make it to the next farm. They were cyclically homeless, living in their car when there were no labor camps available. When the family were given the advantage of living in the labor camps, they lived in tiny tarpaper-and-wood cabins without indoor plumbing and with a single electric light (Griswold Del Castillo, and Garcia 1995).

If working conditions, meager wages were not enough the workers also endured racism. Chávez remembered, "I still feel the prejudice, whenever I go through a door. I expect to be rejected, even when I know there is no prejudice there." Chávez had experienced a great deal of racism. He recalls as a young boy he and his brother, along with other Mexican-Americans or (Mexican) shoeshine boys were not allowed in White neighborhoods. On one occasion, he and his brother went to a diner, in the window there was a sign that said WHITE TRADE ONLY. The young boys proceeded to order a hamburger, the counter girl told them with a laugh, and "We don't sell to Mexicans." The two boys left, César in tears (Griswold Del Castillo, and Garcia 1995). Other restaurants that the family came across had signs that said NO DOGS OR MEXICANS. Many Mexicans were refused to eat, or even use the restroom in main highway gas stations (Pitrone 1971).

To apply the concept of **risk factor** and analyze Chávez's life, would be the chronic poverty, homelessness, and marginilization as a minority. Research has found that minority children are over represented in rates of disorders such as substance abuse, delinquency and teen suicide (McLoyd 1998). Considering that minority children and youth face multiple disadvantages, such as exclusion from society's benefits (often referred to as marginilization) and poverty, it is understandable why many feel a sense of alienation (Steinhauer 1996). For a child to endure such circumstances as an exploited child worker, constantly relocating, having no real home, little education, and racism are all risk factors. All of these factors could contribute to a child's unsuccessful development. It is clear that these types of negative variables in Chávez's life could have a huge impact on his self-concept, and his development into adulthood.

César also experienced **protective factors** in his life. **Protective factors** – can be described as strengths in the family, school, community and the individual (Masten, and Coatsworth 1998). A **protective factor-** can be as simple as a teacher taking interest in a student. If that child feels that they are receiving support, and interest this can help him/her internalize the support into a stronger self-concept. Through researching César's life I have found that he had protective factors from his mother and grandmother. They provided lots of love, warmth, and guidance.

For example, the years spent on the family farm, Chávez had the benefit of **protective factors**, such as a loving, caring and warm relationship with his mother. He was taught the values of ethics, and respect. Chávez later on reflects on these as secure and happy times. His mother, Juana would teach him about views on nonviolence and morality. She spent a great deal of time with her four children telling them many *cuentos* (stories) and gave them *consejos* and *dichos* (advice and sayings), all with moral point. Chávez later remembered: "I didn't realize the wisdom in her words, but is has been proven to me so many times since" (Griswold Del Castillo, and Garcia 1995).

Another major influence on young Chávez was his grandmother's religious teaching. She instilled a love of the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church, the Sunday masses, Christmas, and Easter obligations, and special feast days. In his life César would depend on the spiritual strength he gained from his grandmother's influence, and the church (Griswold Del Castillo, and Garcia 1995). This relationship with his grandmother is another example of a **protective factor** in his childhood. César's grandmother gave him lots of love, guidance, and nurturance. Through her teachings of Catholicism, César learned how to put faith in a higher power, a faith that was unwavering throughout his life. César drew upon his faith when times got hard just as his grandmother, and mother did.

In short, these three **protective factors**, his warm caring relationship with his mother, grandmother, and connection to the Catholic Church helped build a strong sense of self for the young César. As César grew older, and became exposed to an array of injustices as an adolescent, and young man he drew from his early teachings of morality, and nonviolence to help resist his adversity.

Conclusion

Chávez is an example of what it is like for a poor, uneducated, minority can make it in today's society. Through my research I have found that he became a success because of his early experiences both positive and negative. If it were not for all of César's experiences in life he would not have become the man or the leader he developed into.

The theory of Resiliency is useful tool in analyzing the successes of disadvantaged children, such as the case of César Chávez. Resiliency theory offers a different, more positive focus on how to analyze what variables *work* to assist in the successes of disadvantaged children. Moreover, there is a focus on *strengths*, rather than deficits. It is my hope that by providing a case study of César Chávez's resiliency, will help at-risk children uncover factors that are present in the lives that will foster their *personal* resiliency.

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